

## **From Gwangju to Tiananmen: East Asian Autonomous Movements Remembered**

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### **Abstract:**

Beginning with the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, a chain reaction of revolts and uprisings occurred in East Asia. This paper delineates essential features of the Gwangju Uprising: the “beautiful community” among the city's citizens; their spontaneous ability to defend, govern and manage their own affairs; and the rapid self-organization of the Citizens' Army and Citizen-Student Struggle Committee. The paramount significance of Gwangju in motivating the successful June 1987 uprising in South Korea led to a massive autonomous workers movement and eventually to the conviction of former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. Other East Asian movements of the 1980s and early 1990s are touched upon: the Philippines (1986), Burma (1988), China (1989), Nepal (1990), Thailand (1992), and Indonesia (1998); special attention is paid to Burma. These movements help us to understand popular forms of consciousness and autonomous actions among citizenry at the end of the 20th century.

### **From Gwangju to Tiananmen: East Asian Uprisings Remembered**

The Gwangju people's uprising of 1980 was the fixed point around which dictatorship was transformed into democracy in South Korea.<sup>[1]</sup> Years afterwards, its energy continues to resonate strongly across the world. Its history provides both a glimpse of free societies of the future and a realistic example for others whose dreams of parliamentary democracy remain unfulfilled. The most important dimensions of the Gwangju uprising are its affirmation of human dignity and prefiguration of substantive democracy. Gwangju has a meaning in Korean history that can only be compared to that of the Paris Commune in French history and of the battleship Potemkin in Russian history. Like the Paris Commune, the people of Gwangju spontaneously rose up and governed themselves until they were brutally suppressed by indigenous military forces abetted by an outside power. And like the battleship Potemkin, the people of Gwangju have repeatedly signaled the advent of revolution in Korea—in recent times from the 1894 Tonghak rebellion and the 1929 student revolt to the 1980 uprising.

Forged in the sacrifices of thousands, the mythical power of the Gwangju people's uprising was tempered in the harsh years after 1980, when the dictatorship tried to cover up its massacre of as many as 2000 people.<sup>[2]</sup> Even before the Gwangju Commune had been ruthlessly crushed, the news of the uprising was so subversive that the military burned an unknown number of corpses, dumped others into unmarked graves, and destroyed its own records. To prevent word of the uprising from being spoken publicly, thousands of people were arrested, and hundreds

tortured as the military tried to suppress even a whisper of its murders.<sup>[3]</sup> In 1985, the first book about the Gwangju uprising appeared, Lee Jae-eui's classic history (translated into English as *Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age*<sup>[4]</sup>). Although copies were immediately confiscated and its publisher and suspected author arrested, the book's impact was enormous. Synergized with the message contained within poems, paintings, short stories, woodblock prints, plays, novels, songs and other forms of artistic expression about Gwangju, the truth about the military's brutal killing of so many of its own citizens slowly became known. Korean civil society is so strong that the massacre and subsequent suppression of its history spelled the end of the military dictatorship. As Lee Jae-eui put it: "The reason why the Korean people could overcome that terrible violence so quickly in 1987 was because of Gwangju's resistance."<sup>[5]</sup> President Chun Doo-hwan and his military government may have won the battle of May 1980, but the democracy movement won the war—seven long years later when the Minjung movement ousted the military dictatorship.

As monumental as the courage and bravery of the people in Gwangju were, their capacity for self-government is the defining hallmark of their revolt. In my view, it is the single most remarkable aspect of the uprising. The capacity for self-organization that emerged spontaneously, first in the heat of the battle and later in the governing of the city and the final resistance to the military's counterattack, is mind expanding. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high rates of literacy, the mass media, and universal education (which in Korea includes military training for every man) forged a capacity in millions of people to govern themselves far more wisely than the tiny elites all too often ensconced in powerful positions. Choi Jungwoon's classic study<sup>[6]</sup> developed the notion of the "absolute community," which arose among Gwangju people as they battled the brutality of the paratroopers and drove the military out of the city: "In this community, there was no private ownership, other people's lives were as important as one's own, and time stood still. In this community, discriminations disappeared, individuals were merged into one, and fear and joy were intermingled. Distress at the end of one world coexisted with confusion at the beginning of a new world, in which emotion and reason were reborn... The key to this absolute community was 'love'—in other words, a human response to noble beings... the struggle at the moment was an exciting self-creation... the intuitive nature of human dignity does not lie in the act and the result of pursuing individual interests and social status, but can be found in the act of recognizing a value larger than individual life and dedicating oneself to attaining it."<sup>[7]</sup>

After the military had been driven out of the city on May 21, hundreds of fighters in the citizens' army patrolled the city. Everyone shared joy and relief. The city was free. Markets and stores were open for business, and food, water and electricity were available as normally. No banks were looted, and "normal crimes" like robbery, rape or theft hardly occurred—if at all. From below, people created mobile strike forces and a Citizens Army, a Settlement Committee, and a Struggle Committee; they cared for corpses and grieving family members, healed the wounded, and cleaned up the liberated city.

Foreigners freely walked the streets. American missionary Arnold Peterson reported that his car, flying an American flag and with a large sign reading "Foreigners' Car," was cheered by people in the streets.<sup>[8]</sup> Coffins, gasoline and cigarettes were in short supply. While the CSC attempted to procure more coffins from the army, the CSC rationed gasoline, and people shared cigarettes with their newly found comrades in arms, happy to be alive. For some people, sharing cigarettes symbolized an important part of the communal experience. Storeowners who still had cigarettes

often sold—or gave away—one pack at a time (to be fair to everyone). Blood had been in short supply at the hospital, but as soon as the need became known, people flooded in to give theirs, including barmaids and prostitutes, who at one point publicly insisted that they, too, be permitted to donate. At many of the rallies, thousands of dollars for the settlement committees were quickly raised through donations. All these examples are indications of how remarkably the whole city came together.

Spontaneously a new division of labor emerged. For days, citizens voluntarily cleaned the streets, cooked rice, served free meals in the marketplace, and kept constant guard against the expected counterattack. Everyone contributed to and found their place in liberated Gwangju. The citizens' army, many of whom had stayed up all night, nonetheless were models of responsibility. People dubbed the new militia the "Citizens' Army" or "our allies" (as opposed to the army, "our enemy.") They protected the people and the people, in turn, took care of them. Without any indoctrination and none of the military madness that elicits monstrous behavior in armies around the world, the men and women of the Citizens' Army behaved in an exemplary fashion. Unafraid to impose a new type of order based on the needs of the populace, they disarmed all middle school and high school students, an action for which the *Militants' Bulletin* took responsibility,<sup>[9]</sup> and they ordered the police and civil servants back to work (although the former were kept disarmed).

Preexisting organizations like Dulbul Night School, Clown Theatre Troupe and Nok Du Bookstore helped organize daily rallies of tens of thousands of people where direct democracy held sway. Decisions made by tens of thousands of people were implemented by smaller groups (including the Citizens' Army). Even though the rallies were huge, many people were able to express heartfelt needs. As Lee Jae-eui described it: The fountain was now the center of unity. All walks and classes of people spoke—women street vendors, elementary school teachers, followers of different religions, housewives, college students, high school students and farmers. Their angry speeches created a common consciousness, a manifestation of the tremendous energy of the uprising. They had melded together, forging a strong sense of solidarity throughout the uprising. For the moment, the city was one.<sup>[10]</sup>

With US encouragement and support, the new military dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan finally took back the city on the morning of May 27, 1980 (coincidentally the same day as the Paris Commune had been crushed in 1871). Although brutally repressed, the Korean movement never ceased to carry on the struggle to overthrow the dictatorship. After the massacre of May 27, it took two years for the families of the victims to meet, and five years passed before the first book about the uprising appeared. Yet in the rest of Korea, Gwangju became the watchword for democracy. Three days after the massacre of May 27, a student in Seoul, Kim Eu-gi, committed suicide to protest the government's actions. Nine days later, the worker Kim Jong-tae burned himself to death in protest. On May 17, 1985, coordinated protests at 80 colleges and universities involved some 38,000 students who called for the truth about the killings to be made public. A week later, 73 Seoul students occupied the US Information Service building for three days in an attempt to compel an apology from the US government for its role. On August 15, 1985 as protests continued, Hong Ki-il burned himself to death on Gwangju's main street because of the government's failure to reveal the truth.

Protests continued to intensify, and the glorious victory of the Minjung movement in 1987 centered around a massive outpouring of popular protest that began on June 10, 1987. For nineteen days, hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in the streets demanding direct presidential elections. When Gwangju native Lee Han-yol was killed in a

student protest near Yonsei University, more than one million people gathered to bury him. As in the Philippines a year earlier, massive occupation of public space compelled the military to relent—in this case by agreeing to hold direct elections for president. In July and August, thousands of strikes involving millions of workers broke out. Although the government granted major concessions, the struggle continued.

### **The Autonomous Wave of Workers' Struggle**

Few countries have witnessed the kind of massive outpouring of grievances witnessed by Korea in 1987. The June Uprising successfully won civil liberties and elections, but the daily lives of workers were still miserably dictated by poverty and drudgery. Encouraged by the success of the democracy movement, grass-roots actions in the country's large factories emerged at a dizzying pace and intensity. In July and August, more than three million workers in over 3000 workplaces erupted in unison, demanding substantial wage increases, improved working conditions and independent unions. Within two weeks of the government's announcement of direct elections, labor unrest erupted like a volcano and spread throughout the country. With no central organization, wildcat strikes, work stoppages, street actions, plant closures and marches were spontaneously organized. The capacity of Korean workers for self-organization and action in this period is a major indication of the capacity of ordinary people to take control of their lives and articulate their needs and to act upon them.

Although many observers have noted that labor unions were not in the forefront of the June Uprising, as evidenced by the few union leaders who were part of the broad coalition that emerged to lead the struggle, the largest proportion of those arrested in June were laborers, a clear indication of the participation of workers in the mass protests.<sup>[11]</sup> Despite the bare subsistence eacked out in factory jobs, the grievances brought to public attention by workers were not simply wages, but included issues like a shorter work-week, dress and hair codes, mandatory morning calisthenics, and the arbitrary authority allocated by companies to ruthless foremen. The space won by the June uprising, workers cared little that their strikes were illegal; instead, they dared the companies to challenge their new-found power: taking managers hostage, occupying company buildings, and instituting new norms of behavior in the workplace. Most importantly of all, workers organized autonomous unions that would represent their real needs. Within one year, some 4,000 new unions representing 700,000 workers were brought into existence.<sup>[12]</sup> Led by the class's "organic intellectuals," leadership positions were rotated (sometimes by choice, often by necessity as arrests and firings of visible spokespersons was all too common), the capacity of the working class for self-organization is a remarkable feature of the new social landscape in Korea.

For the NCDC and organizations that led the June Uprising, the main tasks were getting the political prisoners released, civil rights reinstated and preparing for free elections. Although defeated in the streets, the regime still had its core intact; Chun resigned as party president on July 10 and was superceded by Noh—clearly a preparatory move for the coming presidential election. The cabinet was reshuffled; military men reassigned. Although 900 prisoners were quickly released, hundreds more remained in prison; more significantly, no discussion of civil liberties being expanded took place. Public statements by generals bolstered persistent rumors of a military coup that Kim Dae-Jung would never be allowed to become president. The precarious character of the June victory necessitated years of subsequent struggles to realize even formal democracy.

Left out of the June 29 settlement, factory workers quickly mobilized, conducting an average of 44 actions a day from June 29 to September 15.<sup>[13]</sup> Altogether in the number of labor disputes in this period was about double the

number in the previous ten years. Of a total of 3,492 disputes recorded by the government in this period, the actions were concentrated in manufacturing (1802 cases) and transportation (1248 cases). Of the 342 factories with more than 1,000 workers, 65% experienced struggles. With the police called to duty against the democratization movement, the factories were open for action. Inspired by the victories of the democratic movement and protected by its continuing mobilizations, workers claimed their part of the country's expanding liberties.

In August alone, there were 2,577 struggles recorded; the rapidly expanding "eros effect" peaked on August 28, when 200 new struggles emerged. As the government moved to isolate and repress the workers, and more significantly—as companies settled the disputes in favor of their laborers—the factories quieted.

On July 5, the signal for the eruption of the labor movement was the formation of a union at Hyundai Engine in Ulsan, the home base of Hyundai chaebols and site of an industrial park that employed over 150,000 factory workers. As the union movement spread to Hyundai Mipo Shipyards, top management quickly organized yellow unions loyal to the corporation. But it was too late to foil the workers: by August 8, they had organized a Council of Labor Unions in Hyundai, consisting of 12 insurgent unions.

Workers had long tasted the bitter results of government control. According to the FKTU (the unions controlled by the dictatorship) the minimum monthly living costs for a family were about 629,000 won, but workers made barely half of that (336,908) even when they worked overtime. (At that time, the dollar stood at about 830 won.) The FKTU 82.4% of laborers were receiving less than minimum costs of living and worked an average of 54.7 hours per week. <sup>[14]</sup> The wage-freeze policy of Chun had exacerbated the problem. Although unions were legal, they were small and government-controlled. Scarcely a million members belonged to unions at the end of 1986.

Clearly, the workers needed a raise and refused to be delayed any longer: as company after company settled the disputes, the average wage increase amounted to 13.5%. More than one-time wage increases, workers needed unions, and in the wave of disputes, more than 1,060 new ones were organized in about 70 days. Alongside the creation of new unions, workers fought against the yellow unions, isolating their leaders and

Among the chaebols, labor unions had been rare despite their domination of the economy, tax breaks and government investment schemes. The top five chaebols in 1987 controlled nearly one-quarter of domestic sales and employed more than 10% of all workers in manufacturing.

When Hyundai founder Chung Ju Young announced unions would come to his company "only after earth covers my eyes" the gauntlet had been thrown. On July 5, a hundred workers met in an Ulsan disco and formed the first union. After the Council of 12 unions formed and demanded negotiations, his response was to lock out six factories on August 17, declaring he would never negotiate with an illegal organization. Workers responded immediately, marching tens of thousands strong downtown, where they occupied the city for 2 days. Easily defeating the riot police because they had brought with them their forklifts, dump trucks, cranes, graders, steamrollers and other equipment, the 40,000 workers marched downtown and back. The next day, 40,000 workers, followed by 30,000 family members marched to Ulsan Sports Stadium, where the Deputy Minister of Labor (but no company representatives) gave the government's guarantee that their demands would be satisfactorily met. This victory on July 18 spurred renewed protests in other factories. The workers had won—but not in the mind of Chung Ju Young, who

refused to acknowledge anything promised to the workers by the government. By September 1, when they had failed to receive anything, laborers again occupied the downtown. More than 20,000 people took over city hall. Hyundai heavy industries eventually settled for more than a 15% pay raise, a figure that became the standard for others.

The strike wave spread quickly from Hyundai to Korea Zinc on August 3, Hyosung Metals and Hyosung Aluminum on the 4<sup>th</sup>, Taehan Aluminum on 4<sup>th</sup>, Kyunggi Chemical, Lucky Ulsan and Hansung Enterprises on the 5<sup>th</sup>, Jinyang on the 6<sup>th</sup>.

The wave of insurgency quickly spread. From Ulsan's epicenter to Pusan and Masan, to Seoul and Taegu, Gwangju, Taejon and Incheon—from industry to industry and region to region—aftershocks soon appeared. At the peak of the struggle, tens of thousands of workers were armed with safety helmets, wooden clubs and heavy equipment to protect themselves. In many instances, they overwhelmed the government forces arrayed against them; yet they did not contest political power. Their signs often included: "Head of the Company, Submit to negotiations", a concession that the company head was in charge, that the paternalism of the executives would continue under more humane conditions. Hundreds of new unions formed continued the struggle in the decades after 1987, but the new unions have yet to assume political leadership of the country.

To understand the depths of the workers grievances, one could begin by noting the class-coded uniforms required at work; the crude and vulgar language thrown their way every day by superiors, to say nothing of the sexual outrages suffered by women, the dress and hair codes, the inadequate food in workers cafeterias. All these outrages pale in comparison to the unsafe conditions in which workers were required to participate. More than 150,000 were killed or injured in industrial accidents every year; an average of 4 fatalities per day; [\[15\]](#) on top of that, 21, 923 workers were physically disabled in accidents in 1986. As the workers upsurge brought to the fore long-repressed needs of the class, a National league for Victimized Workers formed on September 27 during a rally. The group noted that under Chun, at least 10, 295 workers were killed in workplace accidents and an additional 969,304 were injured.

Companies organized "kusadae"—strikebreakers composed of thugs, managers and paid paramilitaries to attack workers. In Tongil Industry, a machinery company run by Sun-myung Moon (the Moonies Unification Church) more than 500 kusadae attacked workers who were peacefully sitting-in, injuring many. On July 30, 1000 female laborers sat-in at ICC Corporation in Pusan, then one of the world's largest shoe manufacturers, to demand better pay and more vacations, better food and an end to the yellow union that repeatedly betrayed them, were attacked by 600 goons wielding iron pipes, hammers and sticks. The women were forced into their dormitory where they were assaulted again.

Even the FKTU organized a 1,000-man armed crew to attack autonomous union movements, and the government unleashed a special riot squad, the white-helmeted "White Skull Corps," to attack workers. Hundreds of leaders were summarily fired. In this period, the Anti-Communist Federation and the Moonies staged rallies and whipped up sentiment against the "Communist" influence in the labor movement.

By early October, the government had gained the upper hand, and workers movement retreated. When the government announced on September 29, that they were taking steps to make laborers "a middle class" it was already

too late for the movement to unite. Preoccupied with the exigencies of the struggle for democracy, the democratization movement had done little to intervene for the workers. When workers occupied the Pusan offices of the NCDC on October 15, others soon joined them throughout the country on October 20, 21 and 22, compelling the democratic forces to reevaluate their trajectory. The NCDC's Labor Committee organized a rally against the repression of the labor movement at Myongdong Cathedral on October 27, but the group's weakened power was evident, especially four days later, when their call for national demonstrations on October 31 were easily blocked by the police.

The Korean masses were focused on the upcoming presidential election. The June 29<sup>th</sup> Declaration had lured the opposition into the electoral system, and cleverly changed the dictatorship from an "object of overthrow" into an "object of competition."<sup>[16]</sup> The National Assembly quickly passed a constitutional amendment for direct elections, and they were held on December 16, 1987. Four months later, the NA was reelected and the opposition won a majority of seats.

In mid-September the US hosted a visit by Noh Tae-woo, a clear indication of US support for his candidacy. The amended constitution was ratified by voters on October 27, and election date set for December 16. In the election campaigns, rallies of over a million supporting one candidate or another were orchestrated, and violent confrontations took place when supporters clashed. By fomenting regional antagonisms, the media and the government were able to control the situation. The failure of the two Kim's to unite in a single opposition candidate afforded Roh Tae-woo a plurality of votes and assured the military of a smooth transition to a new regime.

On November 29, only a few weeks before the election, KAL 858 disappeared off the coast of Burma with 118 passengers. Although many people today suspect the involvement of ANSP (the Agency for National Security Planning—formerly the KCIA), at that time, North Korea was blamed and helped swing thousands of voters to Noh.

Yet, even the failure of the Kim's to unite and possible North Korean armed struggle are overshadowed by substantial claims of fraud. In the election, the government's list of eligible voters included 25,870,000 people—almost a million more than the statistics published by the government; more than 90% of absentee ballots (numbering almost a million people) went to Roh; in districts where Honam residents were substantial, Kim Dae-Jung received only a modicum of votes; and on December 16, witnesses observed officials smuggling ballots out of the Kuro office by hiding them under loaves of bread in a delivery truck. Thousands of people occupied the Kuro Gu offices in protest of fraud, and they were barraged by tear gas—after which more than 900 people were arrested.

Tactics used in 1987 in Korea are all too reminiscent of the 2000 election in the US, when George W. Bush was able to win the narrowest of margins by having hundreds of Floridians stricken off the eligible rolls or simply refused admittance to polling places. The chickens do come home to roost!

Lee Suk-kyu, a laborer at Daewoo shipyards, was killed on August 22 by a tear gas canister that hit him squarely on the chest, and his funeral on August 28 became a national mobilization with throughout the country. Police moved in, arresting more than 933 people, and even snatched his body from the procession that sought to carry it to Gwangju's Mangwoltong cemetery. In early September, hundreds of strikers were arrested whenever new disputes arose, and the

government orchestrated a concerted campaign aimed at swinging public opinion against the workers by inventing stories of worker brutality that were given wide play in the press. In an extraordinary cabinet meeting televised on September 5, the director of the Korean Federation of Industries was invited to present his case against the workers; when his blatant stories were broadcast, 35 pastors in Seoul and Incheon went on hunger strike in protest; when they occupied the FKI offices, hundreds of riot police removed them.

The day after Lee was killed, about 5,000 students and workers gathered at Yonsei University to support workers who had been fired during the struggles. After an all-night student session, they agreed to work in unison but not together, emphasizing that the need to strengthen and support the autonomy of workers. Dong

Number of labor disputes increased to 3749 in 1987 from 276 in 1986—2552 in August. HJ p. 247.

This was not a movement for revolution: the signs on the workers banners in Ulsan (when they occupied the city called upon their mayor for policy change to be sure—and the demand for independent trade UNIONS was radical enough in its context. But like the Millions of Korean who had been placated Roh's June 29<sup>th</sup> pronouncement, Confucian patriarchy militated against the formulation of revolutionary aspirations and actions.

Continuing intransigence led to a new strike at Hyundai on December 12, 1988, which lasted for 128 days. [\[17\]](#) Previous union leaders had been arrested or dismissed, and the workers were poorly organized, as evident when their new leader signed a contract few agreed with. To make matters worse on December 28, 1988, Roh Tae-woo announced a rollback of the liberalization since the June Uprising and resumption of the repressive measures of the past aimed at “maintaining civic security.” As the workers refused to end their strike and fought back *kusadae* attacks, the government sent in 15,000 riot police on March 30, 1989; The assault came at dawn from air, sea and land, but when the police reached the factories, they found them deserted: the workers had secretly retreated to their dorms. Hours later, when the police regrouped and attacked again, savage fighting erupted and quickly spread to nearby Hyundai plants; parts of Ulsan became battle zones. The next day, family members of campus supporters arrived to help. Intense fighting lasted for ten days, but ended with dozens of workers under arrest and dozens more dismissed. Despite the defeat in the streets, the workers had won important gains: imprisoned union leaders had been released, their organization became more disciplined and united, and their control of the plant floors was vibrant. The crucible of the struggle had amalgamated a hard core, which attracted many new people to join the union.

Less than a year later, renewed struggles broke out at Hyundai when those arrested in March were given heavy jail sentences. One of the grievances articulated was that broadcast workers from the government-owned KBS who had waged a militant strike were simply released while factory workers were forced to suffer. A union leaflet expressed it: “this time we must correct, once and for all, their attitude that pen and broadcasting are to be feared but workers with hammer and welding machine are to be ignored.” [\[18\]](#)

This struggle became known as the Goliath struggle because 78 workers climbed to the top of the giant crane by that name nearly a football field high when riot police arrived once again to clear out the strikers. As fighting raged between the 12,000 police and thousands of strikers, eastern Ulsan was once again a battle zone. Although it signaled strikes at other sites where the new unions were strong, and on May 4, more than 120,000 workers at 146 plants went on strike. The political character of the strike was clear in workers resisting the government's repression of their

leaders. Although 51 people remained atop the Goliath crane until May 10, they descended when it was apparent that the majority of workers had returned to their jobs.

Despite their defeat, workers were increasingly assertive and militant, and their newfound pride produced regional councils that went beyond plant or industry organizing.

White-collar unions soon were formed in the financial sector, teachers, journalists and office workers. By the end of 1988, eight occupational sectors had formed and joined with factory workers in creating a national organization, the NCTU Koo p. 179. Unlike the 1970s, when women workers had been in the forefront of the movement, the great wave of uprisings in from 1987 was composed mainly of male factory workers. The new union movement, born out of this wave reflected gender hierarchies: although women were 27.4 of union members, only 3.6% of local union wore women. [19] Companies hiring more and more part-time workers and expanding subcontractor inputs set a further fissure in the ranks of the working class. And shipping off labor-intensive jobs to China and Southeast Asia.

In a cabinet meeting in May 1989, Roh tae-woo said: “Democracy, as well as the future of this country, will depend upon our capability to crush the violent revolutionary forces that attempt to destroy democracy.” Hard Journey p. 48.

As the government cracked down on the new union, it lost members rapidly and many of the leaders who emerged found themselves in prison. The change in momentum in the early 1990s appeared to swing to the government, but white-collar unions began organizing in earnest. Led by the protracted teachers struggle in which at least 1,5000 teachers were dismissed, transportation workers, hospital workers, researchers, workers at foreign owned firms and communications workers

In November 1995, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) formed. Although illegal, the new national organization included more than 800 unions and 400,000 members.

January 22, 1990 the ruling Democratic justice Party and two opposition party’s (Kim Young-sam’s Unification democratic Party and Kin Jong-pil’s New Democratic republican party) merged to create the Democratic Liberal Party. The Roh government, then became the ruling party in the Assembly, and quickly pushed through legislation prohibiting strikes and restricting union activities. As the government wielded its heavy club, workers at Hyundai heavy Industries sat-in atop a Goliath crane in April 1990. Roh sent in thousands of police to crush them, and in response 120,000 workers from 155 unions participated in a general strike. Helping the labor movement were employees of KBS, who announced their union and campaign to democratize the airwaves in May 1990.

Finally, in a remarkable turn of events, former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were sent to prison for their role in the Gwangju massacre.

### **The Gwangju Uprising and Asian Democracy Movements**

Suppressed in 1980, the people’s uprising nonetheless had worldwide repercussions. [20] Although East Asian dictatorships, many in power for decades, seemed unshakable in the early 1980s, a wave of revolts and uprisings soon transformed the region. Both Kim Dae Jung and Benigno Aquino, popular leaders of vast democratic strata,

were in exile in Newton, Massachusetts, USA, in the early 1980s, when they got acquainted and exchanged views on how best to win democracy.

The 1989 revolutions in Europe are well known, but Eurocentrism often prevents comprehension of their Asian counterparts. Furthermore, in the US at least, the events in 1989 in China are well known while hardly anyone has heard of Gwangju. The western media afforded wide coverage to Communism's internal problems while scarcely covering even within the USA's sphere of influence. Korea has long been relegated to the margins of American consciousness as indicated by the Korean War's nickname as "the forgotten war." The 1950 massacre of hundreds of Korean civilians by troops at No Gun Ri is known as an "American My Lai" (after the US massacre of Vietnamese villagers in 1968), even though the My Lai massacre occurred nearly two decades after those in Korea. Thus, when Gwangju is called the "Korean Tiananmen," does the time difference of only nine years signify an attenuation of the attention deficit of US media?

Six years after the Gwangju uprising, the Marcos dictatorship was overthrown in the Philippines. As mentioned, Aquino and Kim Dae-jung had known each other in the USA, and the experiences of the Gwangju uprising helped to inspire action in Manila. In February 1986 in the Philippines, the walkout of 30 computer operators counting the votes in an election sparked 18 days of protests that included the Catholic hierarchy and a mutiny by key elements of the military. In a matter of weeks, the Marcos dictatorship was brought to a sudden end. The confrontation was won by the rebellious troops supported by hundreds of thousands of people who refused to leave the streets. The Philippine people-power revolution in turn inspired the slowly rebuilding movement in South Korea.

[21] Less than a month after the outbreak of the people-power revolution in the Philippines, the Cardinal and Bishops in Seoul began saying that people of South Korea had learned a lesson. Within a year of the overthrowing of Marcos, the military dictatorship in South Korea was given its rightful place on the rubbish heap of history. In 1987, as mentioned above, Koreans won direct presidential elections after a 19-day uprising when people refused to leave the streets, but in the Korean case, there was no military mutiny that led the movement to victory.

All through Asia, people's movements for democracy and human rights appeared: an end to 38 years of martial law was won in Taiwan in 1987, where anecdotal evidence tells of people singing Korean democracy movement songs in the streets; in Burma a popular movement exploded in March 1988, when students and ethnic minorities took to the streets of Rangoon (much as had happened in Gwangju). Despite horrific repression, the movement compelled President Ne Win to step down after 26 years of rule. In August, five days of new student-led protests forced his replacement to resign. A general strike committee representing workers, writers, monks and students coordinated a nationwide movement for multiparty democracy, but the military shot down thousands more people—bringing to over 10,000 the number of people it killed that year. Arresting thousands more, including over 100 elected representatives, the Burmese military government continues to use an iron fist to remain in power.

The next year, student activists in China activated a broad public cry for democracy, only to be killed by the dozens at Tiananmen Square and hunted for years afterward. [22] The revolt in China was from outside the ranks of the Party. Even within the halls of communism, however, as the chain reaction of revolts against military dictatorships continued, a member of the Politburo of Vietnam, General Tran Do, publicly asked for multi-party democracy in Vietnam in 1989, an unprecedented event. Nepal's turn was next. Seven weeks of protests beginning in April 1990 compelled the king to democratize the government. The next country to experience an explosion was Thailand, when 20 days of hunger strike

a leading opposition politician brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets in May 1992. Dozens were killed when the military suppressed street demonstrations, and because of this brutality, General Suchinda Krapayoon was forced to step down.<sup>[23]</sup> In 1998 in Indonesia, students called for a “people-power revolution” and were able to overthrow Suharto. Interviews conducted by an American correspondent at the universities in Indonesia determined that the people power slogan was adopted from the Philippines, as was the tactical innovation of the occupation of public space.<sup>[24]</sup>

### **The Meaning of East Asian Uprisings**

The relationship of these revolts to each other is an understudied dimension of these movements. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Gwangju Uprising stands as a shining example of the rapid spread of revolutionary aspirations and actions. The spontaneous chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space signify the sudden entry into history of millions of ordinary people who act in a unified fashion because they intuitively believe that they can change the direction of their society. In such moments, universal interests become generalized at the same time as the dominant values of society (national chauvinism, hierarchy, domination, regionalism, possessiveness, etc.) are negated. This has been referred to as the “absolute community” and “organic solidarity” of participants in the Gwangju Commune. Humans have an instinctual need for freedom—something that we grasp intuitively—and it was this instinctual need that was sublimated into a collective phenomenon during the Gwangju uprising.

The sudden emergence of hundreds of thousands of people occupying public space, the spread of the revolt from one city to another and throughout the countryside, the intuitive identification with each other of hundreds of thousands of people and their simultaneous belief in the power of their actions, the suspension of normal values like regionalism, competitive business practices, criminal behavior, and acquisitiveness are dimensions of the “eros effect.”<sup>[25]</sup> After World War 2, the sudden and unexpected contestation of power has become a significant tactic in the arsenal of popular movements. Thought to be unique or exceptionally rare, this phenomenon was repeated in large strokes in Burma in 1988, as I summarize below.

### **Burma 8-8-88**

At 8:08 a.m. on August 8, 1988, Rangoon dockworkers walked off their jobs, a signal for the general strike. In the words of one of the people involved in late-night meetings the night before, “There was actually no central organization for the demonstrations.”<sup>[26]</sup> That day, as hundreds of thousands of people stopped daily life, it seemed as if every group in the diverse country was in motion with colorful banners and in complete solidarity with each other. Notable was a disciplined column of monks who carried their bowls upside down as a sign of the general strike. The festive mood of people was reflected in their calling the army units on the streets “elder brothers” and urging them to join the uprising. These most massive protests in memory were answered by days of bloody massacres in which thousands of people were killed. When interim ruler Sein Lwin announced his resignation on August 12, people again rushed with joy into the streets; dancing happily, they banged pots and pans, laughed, cried, and celebrated their victory.

Joy was everywhere evident as a “carnival of democracy” transpired. The previously spontaneous movement began to organize itself more systematically. Monks and street gangs took over the task of providing security for people. As government officials abandoned their offices, strike committees moved in. It seemed that every group of citizens,

from transvestites to gravediggers and blind people,<sup>[27]</sup> organized strike committees; victory parades were hastily assembled; newspapers were published; representatives sent to other cities and regions. In Mandalay, a committee of monks and lawyers organized daily rallies. In more than 200 of the country's 314 towns, strike centers emerged. In areas where Muslims and Buddhists had only recently been fighting, unity prevailed. "Communal frictions and old grudges were forgotten, and maybe for the first time ever, all national and political groups across the country joined together for a common cause... The yellow banner of Buddhism fluttered beside Islam's green flag with the crescent moon."<sup>[28]</sup> Rock groups serenaded demonstrations, and workers in factories and offices formed independent trade unions. The workers for the railroad announced they would not provide any more special trains for "dictators of the one-party system." In North Okkalapa, where the fighting had been intense, people erected a concrete monument 8 feet 8.8 inches high in memory of their lost ones. In neighborhoods near the Rangoon General Hospital, people donated a blanket and a pillow for wounded still being treated; even black market vendors with medicines handed over their wares for free. Local citizens' committees took over the normal functions of the police. In some cases, because of rising crime rates, bamboo fences were erected; citizen patrols and monks often were the judges when a criminal was brought to justice. In many places, monks also supervised garbage collection, made sure water was available, and directed traffic.

On September 8, more than a million people marched in Rangoon and Mandalay, and three days later, the Parliament voted to end one-party rule. Many soldiers and policemen were by now joining in the protests, On September 9, 150 air force members went on strike, and two other units soon did so as well. Uniformed columns of police, complete with their bands, also attended the demonstrations. In the opinion of Bertil Lintner, one of the most knowledgeable observers at that time, "Any high-ranking army officer who had taken an armed infantry unit into the capital and declared his support for the uprising would have become a national hero immediately, and the tables would have been turned." Unfortunately, no such hero stepped forward. Rumors circulated wildly, one, closely resembling a rumor in Gwangju in 1980, had a US aircraft carrier entering Burmese waters to "liberate Rangoon."<sup>[29]</sup>

On September 18, hundreds of thousands of people again took to the streets of Rangoon; the next day, however, carefully placed machine guns opened fire, and troops in formation appeared suddenly and fired indiscriminately into the crowds. Nearly every strike center was attacked; schoolgirls shot dead; funerals attacked; two young boys shot in front of their parents in South Okkalapa. All through September and October, homes and monasteries were raided, police with photographs sought out suspects from the turmoil of the past weeks, arresting or summarily executing them, and hundreds of government workers arrested or fired. When the new military regime issued an ultimatum for people to return to work or face severe consequences, the strike collapsed on October 3. Although the National League for Democracy won the subsequent elections, the military rulers of Burma have used the iron fist to remain power for nearly two decades. On May 18, 2004, Win Khet, member of the central committee of the National League for Democracy, accepted the Gwangju prize for Human Rights on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi. He summarized the impact of Gwangju on his movement:

"We appreciate the Gwangju Democratic Movement, the cornerstone of Korea's democracy, very much and firmly believe it is a role model for all the fighters for the institution of a genuine democratic federal union based on equality and self-determination in Burma."

### **Concluding Remarks**

As an example of ordinary people taking power into their own hands and winning democracy, the Gwangju Uprising was a precursor of a truly free society from which people all over the world can learn. In May 1980, during the brutal reality of military attack, people beat back the paratroopers and briefly tasted freedom. The example set by the people of Gwangju in their spontaneous capacity for self-government and the organic solidarity of the population has already been replicated in Burma. Alongside these indications of the unrealized potential of human beings today, Gwangju led to concrete gains—the overthrow of the military dictatorship and the inspiration of other democratic movements. Today, the uprising continues to provide all of us with a palpable feeling for the dignity of human beings and the necessity of intensifying the struggle for liberation.

While the mainstream version of history dominates the airwaves, beneath the surface, people's understanding constitutes a powerful undercurrent, dubbed a "second superpower" in February 15, 2003. With no central organization 30 million people took to the streets to protest the second US war on Iraq even though it had not yet started. Will the cacophony of revolts in East Asia after Gwangju, coupled with new insurgencies in Latin America and elsewhere, lead to a more harmonized anti-globalization uprising? Never envisioned prior to Gwangju, the possibility of a Gwangju-style revolt on a global scale would prove to be the most enduring legacy of the events of May 1980.

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[1] Georgy Katsiaficas and Na Kahn-chaе (editors), *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[2] The Chun regime claimed only 191 people, including 46 soldiers, were killed; Gwangju city statistics count over 2,600 people as having died in May 1980, exceeding the monthly average by 2300. In 1980, Asia Watch estimated the number killed at over 2000, and that number seems more reasonable than the government statistic.

[3] Although the Western media did carry reports at the time, the Gwangju Commune and the massacres were buried beneath a stream of reports on the "Korean economic miracle" and the North Korea "threat." US complicity in the massacre is embodied in the man who later became US ambassador to the United Nations — Richard Holbrooke. Although he claimed, "the Americans didn't know what was going on," Holbrooke was the leader of the US team that approved the suppression of the Gwangju uprising. In the midst of negotiations for a peaceful settlement in Gwangju, the citizens' councils asked the US to mediate: the US ambassador refused. Encouraging the military to crush the uprising, the US promised the Korean government that the "US would not publicly contest" their version of whatever transpired. After hundreds had been killed, Holbrooke stepped up US economic and diplomatic ties to the new military government, and he personally profited by subsequently serving as a key adviser to Hyundai in the 1980s. For details on US role in the suppression of the Gwangju Uprising, especially their economic motivations, see my article, "Neoliberalism and the Gwangju Uprising" in *Korea Policy Review* (Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government) September 2006.

[4] Lee Jae-eui, *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* (UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series, 1999). This is the single best source in English and I highly recommend it. (It can be ordered from Mr. Leslie Evans, 11372B Bunche Hall, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1487).

[5] Other English language sources I have relied on in my research include a collection of foreign journalists' accounts, *Kwangju in the Eyes of the World* (Kwangju Citizens' Solidarity, 1997), expanded and republished by Henry Scott-Stokes and Lee Jae-eui, editors, *The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea's Tiananmen* (M.E. Sharpe, 2000). The above quote is from an article by Bradley Martin in the original volume, p. 94. Also helpful was *The May 18 Kwangju Democratic Uprising* (The 5.18 History Compilation Committee of Kwangju City, 1999). Last but not least, I have benefited greatly from the May 18 Institute's recent translation of documents and personal testimonies. These are available in digital format on their website. In some cases, I have tried to make the translations flow more easily.

[6] Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea* (Paramus: Homa and Sekey Books: 2006).

[7] Choi, op. cit., pp. 85, 131.

[8] Arnold A. Peterson's essay, "5:18 The Kwangju Incident," is contained in a Korean language book: 아놀드 A. 피터슨, 5.18 광주사태, 풀빛, 1995년 5월 10일. This quote is from p. 47.

[9] May 23 Fighters' Bulletin.

[10] Lee, op. cit., p. 105.

[11] Koo, p. 156.

[12] Koo, p. 161.

- [13] Lost Victory, p. 131.
- [14] Lost Victory, p. 214.
- [15] Lost Victory, p. 230.
- [16] Lost Victory, p. 189.
- [17] Koo, p. 169-171.
- [18] Quoted in Koo, p. 173.
- [19] Koo, p. 182.
- [20] See G. Katsiaficas, “Remembering the Gwangju Uprising,” *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 14 No. 1 Spring-Summer 2000.
- [21] “Lee Jae-eui, “The Seventeen Years of Struggle to Bring the Truth of the Gwangju Massacre to Light,” in *Gwangju in the Eyes of the World*, p. 143.
- [22] Although the government claims far fewer, as many as 700 people may have been killed.
- [23] The Thai Interior Ministry claims 44 dead, 38 disappeared, 11 disabled and over 500 wounded. Human rights activists have noted that hundreds were killed or disappeared. No Thai government has ever been held responsible for massacres of pro-democracy demonstrators in 1973, 1976 or 1992.
- [24] Elsewhere I have developed the concept of the eros effect to explain the rapid spread of revolutionary aspirations and actions. By the eros effect, I mean the spontaneous chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space—both of which are examples of the sudden entry into history of millions of ordinary people who act in a unified fashion, intuitively believing that they can change the direction of their society. In moments of the eros effect, universal interests become generalized at the same time as the dominant values of society (national chauvinism, hierarchy, domination, regionalism, possessiveness, etc.) are negated. This is what I referred to as the organic solidarity or absolute community of participants in the Gwangju Commune. The eros effect is not simply an act of mind, nor can it simply be willed by the “conscious element” (or revolutionary party). Rather it involves popular revolutionary movements emerging as forces in their own right as thousands of ordinary people take history into their own hands. I first developed this concept in relation to the synchronicity of worldwide revolts in 1968; I subsequently extended it in my subsequent book on European autonomous social movements after 1968. My trilogy on social movements in urbanized societies after 1968 will be completed soon with *Unknown Uprisings: Gwangju and East Asian Uprisings After World War 2*.
- [25] See *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston: South End Press, 1987 and Seoul: E-who Press, 1999) and *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006 new printing and Seoul: E-who, 2000) for further elaboration of what I call the “eros effect.”
- [26] Bertil Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (London and Bangkok: White Lotus: 1990) p. 95.
- [27] Vincent Boudreau, “State Repression and Democracy Protest in Three Southeast Asian Countries,” in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 35.
- [28] Lintner, op. cit., p. 114.
- [29] Lintner, op. cit., p. 127.